

# *Dhamma Questions & Responses*

by Ajahn Buddhādāsa

Interpreted into English by Santikaro Bhikkhu (sk)

A Dhamma session offered at Suan Mokkh on 10 January 1991

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*In the late 80s and early 90s, until his health deteriorated too much, Ajahn Buddhādāsa gave regular lectures during the monthly international retreats held at Suan Mokkh and then Suan Mokkh International Dharma Hermitage. Usually, Ajahn spoke in Thai and Santikaro Bhikkhu interpreted into English live. Audio recordings are now available from [www.suanmokkh.org](http://www.suanmokkh.org) and [www.bia.or.th](http://www.bia.or.th). The following is a transcription generously made by a Dhamma volunteer. If you noticed possible improvements to the text and would like to contribute, please kindly contact the Buddhādāsa Indapañño Archives in Bangkok ([suanmokkhbkk@gmail.com](mailto:suanmokkhbkk@gmail.com))*

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This morning, is it okay if I ask you some questions to start with? I'd like to ask: in life, what is the first question? What is the question throughout life? And what is the final question? In Thai, the word *panha* can be translated both 'question' and 'problem.' So, what is the first problem, what is the problem throughout life, and what is the final problem?

*[Response from a retreat participant:]*

*Happiness. [for all three questions]*

*[Another response:]*

*It's always seemed to me that the question is 'what is the question?' Because once we have that question, we'll have the answer. And that's something that I've sat with for a long time. Gertrude Stein, on her death bed, said she didn't know the answer but she might be getting somewhat closer to the question.*

*[Another response:]*

*As for your question, I would like to answer this way. First, what is dukkha? Second, what is the end of the dukkha? And the last, how do we go to the end of the dukkha?*

(SK: Ajahn Buddhādāsa suggests that if the first question is 'What is dukkha?' and second, 'What is the end of dukkha?' The final question ought to

be, ‘If one ends dukkha, what will one get from it?’ Is it worth it? Is it beneficial?)

Somebody else?

*I have watched a baby being born and have watched a person dying. And in both cases, the first issue was the first breath and the last issue was the last breath.*

What kind of a problem is that? Or what question is that?

*The first problem, as I see it, in life – given that there is a problem – is a question of uncertainty about... of opportunities which come about, the way to react to opportunities... about not knowing from the inside. That is what I see as a problem of the moment if there is a problem.*

*Again if I am to make a problem to throughout life, the problem throughout life is to be uncertain. Uncertainty is what I regard to be the chief problem in the human disorder.*

*[Another response:]*

*To answer the question – or the problem rather than the question – the first problem in life is me. It continues being a problem. And for now, I’m embarrassed, me appears and when me disappears, problems will disappear.*

It seems that most of you haven’t thought very much, or maybe have never thought about, these questions before. For us these are quite important yet simple questions. We would suggest that the first question is once we are born, we ought to be asking ‘why were we born?’ Which means, not what causes in the past, but ‘for what purpose are we born?’

The second question, seems to us, that we should be asking throughout life is ‘here we are, born in this world, what are we going to do about it?’ Here we are born as living human beings, what should we be doing?

And the third question is ‘what should we get from life?’ What are we going to get out of life?

So we ask that you ask yourselves these questions continuously. For what purpose were we born? Now that we’re born, what are we going to do about it? And what are we going to get from this life, from being born into this life? If you consider and reflect upon these questions continuously, then you will be covering all the questions of life.

For the first question we can say we are born in order to learn. We are born ignorant. Ignorant just means ‘we don’t know.’ Pāli word is *avijjā* which means ‘not knowing.’ It’s not a negative word as some people take it to be. It’s just means ‘we don’t know.’ And so we are born in order to learn, in order to replace ignorance with correct understanding.

For the second question, ‘what are we going to do throughout life?’ Buddhists would answer that the thing to do is to kill ignorance – to destroy ignorance, to get rid of ignorance – so that it no longer runs our lives. This is what we ought to be working on throughout life – to get rid of, to destroy ignorance.

We’d like to mention something special. Have you ever seen a picture of Lao Tzu, the founder of Taoism, the person supposedly who wrote the Tao Te Ching? Have you ever seen a picture of him?

When we first saw a picture of Lao Tzu, he’s riding on a water buffalo. He’s riding a water buffalo, a very black water buffalo. And in Thailand – in probably most countries where there are... water buffalos are the beast of burden – they’re considered to be very stupid animals. The water buffalo is then a symbol of ignorance. So we thought this is a great picture. There is Lao Tzu riding the water buffalo of ignorance. The buffalo is totally under control.

And so now, can you ride the buffalo? Do any of you know how to ride a water buffalo? Or do you keep falling off?

If you can’t ride the buffalo, then the water buffalo will ride you. That’s how it works. If you can’t ride it, then the water buffalo will drive you.

All the time in life you must try to ride the water buffalo, to be in charge and not let the water buffalo ride you.

So as you travel around the world, find a way to ride the water buffalo.

So we practice *ānāpānasati* – this kind of *ānāpānasati* meditation – in order to learn to ride the water buffalo.

So the meditation center is a water buffalo riding school. When you write home to your friends you can tell them you’ve been going to school to learn how to ride water buffalos.

The last question is that... the answer to the last one for us is that when we can... when you can ride the water buffalo then all problems disappear. This is

the last problem or question that all problems and questions end when we can ride the water buffalo.

In the Spiritual Theater just a little ways over there, there are some copies of the Zen ox herding pictures. In the original version of these pictures, a young man is catching an ox or a water buffalo. And then he's able to ride it – without any hands – playing a flute. But in the final picture the boy or the young man and the buffalo have disappeared, and there is only voidness. There is just voidness – pure freedom – in which the buffalo and the young have disappeared.

The first picture, if you go look at this series maybe tomorrow sometime... the first picture, there's just a young man looking around. He's out in nature, out in the woods, in the fields and he's looking around. In the second picture he sees the footprints of the water buffalo. And then he begins to follow them. And then in the next picture, sticking out from behind a clump of grass, he sees the rear end of the water buffalo. And then he's chasing after it. And he gets out his rope and he manages to get the rope around the buffalo's neck. And then there's a big battle – just as many of you are going through in meditation – where the rope of mindfulness is on the water buffalo but it's a tremendous struggle. Finally he manages to tame the water buffalo enough that he can ride on its back. But he still has to hold the rope very tightly. But then, after a while the water buffalo becomes even calmer and it's no longer to hold the rope. The water buffalo will just follow the young man's wishes. So he can sit on the back playing a flute very naturally. And then in the final picture, both of them disappear. There's no water buffalo. There's no young man. There's just voidness – perfect freedom, perfect peace, total voidness.

The original set of pictures goes like that. But later another version was made that follows the same sequence but after the voidness, the young man is now an old sage and he wanders through the towns or the market places, holding a lamp. After having learned to ride the water buffalo to the point where both the buffalo and the man disappear, then he is able to travel throughout the world shining a light for the world to see.

To struggle with the water buffalo can be very dangerous. So one has to have wisdom. If one fights the water buffalo foolishly, then with just a flick of its head it can catch you on its horns and you're dead. So to struggle with the water buffalo, one needs wisdom or insight. For insight, there must be *samādhi*. The mind must be clear, stable, and thoroughly alert. It begins however with

mindfulness. One starts with mindfulness to start to look for the buffalo, till one is able to keep one's eyes on the buffalo. And then one can get the rope around the buffalo's neck until one can ride the buffalo. To get the rope around its neck takes *samādhi* – the mind that is clean, stable, and active. And then to ride it takes wisdom. When there is *samādhi*, then insight arises. One starts to see things as they are. And through this insight, one is able to ride the buffalo's back until the buffalo and we disappear. And then in the end all there is to do is to travel around the world spreading happiness. Just go around spreading happiness because one has already tamed the buffalo.

To train a water buffalo or a wild steer one needs a stake. One pounds a very firm stake or pole into the ground in order to tie the buffalo down. If you use too short a rope, it won't work. But one has to have something to tie it down and then you give it enough rope to work with. And then one begins to study the buffalo, the animal. And through studying it, one comes to understand it more and more, and is able to calm it down until one understands it thoroughly. And then one can train it to do whatever we need it to do – to ride it, to pull our carts, to plow the fields. Whatever work needs to be done, we train the buffalo accordingly.

In a similar way, when we practice *ānāpānasati* we use the breathing as the stake and tie the buffalo to the stake with mindfulness. And then we calm it and study it – calm it and study it – until we can train it... until there is more and more insight – more and more *vipassanā* – and we can train it to do whatever needs to be done.

The word 'yoga' which many of you have heard literally means to tie, to tie. So yoga properly isn't a bunch of bending postures or anything with the body. But the real meaning of yoga is to tie down the buffalo and then to train it until it's thoroughly under our control. But hear 'our' doesn't mean the ego or the self. It means thoroughly under the control of wisdom.

So the rope is like mindfulness, obviously. If the rope breaks, the buffalo runs away. So when you've been practicing meditation, how many times has the rope broken? How many times have you let the buffalo run away? Over and over again, how many times has this happened where we let the rope break? Or maybe just the buffalo is so out of control that it breaks the rope and we let it get away.

So if we practice until the rope doesn't break any more... Once we can keep the rope on the buffalo, then we can really begin to train it until it is calm and

we can understand it thoroughly. And then when the water buffalo is thoroughly under our control – the kind of natural control where you don't need the rope any more, but where you don't have to use any force anymore – then we've accomplished what needs to be accomplished and received the best thing in life which you can call 'grace' – the word very popular among Christians – the grace of God. One has received this grace when the water buffalo is totally at your control without having to use any force.

If you aren't yet successful in training your buffalo, then continue training it when you get home or as you travel. If you can't train it here, keep working on it until eventually you've at least got the rope around its neck. And then slowly it will get calmer and you'll understand it more and more. So keep trying. Keep working at it.

You came here as tourists. And now you'll leave as pilgrims, taking very very good care and raising your buffalo with more and more wisdom.

This life is the water buffalo.

My questions are finished. Do you have any?

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*How does one keep from thinking so much and dwelling on the past so much when one is trying to meditate and still get some insight?*

Well, that means you're not very good at training the buffalo. When you start thinking about the past, that means the rope broke and you let the buffalo run away. So you've got to find a better rope – got to get a good rope that won't break so easily or won't break at all.

Your rope isn't any good, so go buy a better one.

*How do you buy one?*

You can't go and buy mindfulness in a store. So you have to just keep looking in yourself until you really got mindfulness. Most of us still have a very incomplete or shaky understanding of mindfulness. So keep working at being aware of the breathing. Keep learning to pay attention to the breathing until there's real mindfulness, until you've developed good mindfulness.

When you learned how to ride a bicycle, how many times did you fall off? Or you didn't ever fall off at all?

*Three or four times.*

And every time you fell off, it taught you. Falling off taught you. There wasn't some teacher who taught you how to ride the bicycle. It was falling off that taught you.

Don't overlook this. Don't think that you just fall off and that's all. But every falling off teaches us.

We'd also like to ask you, do you know how to row a boat? Or actually it's more like paddling a canoe. How many days did it take you to be able to paddle it so you could go straight to where you wanted to go without any... can you do that? Then to just keep repeating it over and over again, practicing until we got it so it's totally natural and fluid. That's all we can do, whether it's a bicycle, or a canoe, or mindfulness with breathing.

Can you ride a bicycle without using your hands?

*Yes*

And how much more time did it learn how to do that, to ride without any hands?

*Several/many days.*

Please make use of this message here that each time do it some more – do it again, do it again, do it over and over again, and get a little better each time. If you fall off, learn from the falling off. Get back on and work at it some more. Don't sit there and cry that you fell off, or expect somebody else to put you back on. Just keep trying until you stop falling off.

Please remember that the activity teaches us. The activity – the action, our own action – teaches us, especially our mistakes. The thing that teaches us the best is when we make a mistake. And then we learn how to stop making the mistake. Until you learn it, you keep making the mistake over and over again. But our activity will teach us how to not make the mistakes. And then we'll become more and more skillful.

So this time our breathing isn't successful, so we breathe like this or we breathe like that. We research the breathing until we find the right way to do it.

*Is ānāpāna enough? Some Buddhists say that ānāpāna is good for calm and concentration but not for insight. They say that only through vipassanā is it possible to see things as they really are. Is breathing a way of developing vipassanā?*

The question is a little bit confused. First of all, to use the word *ānāpāna* is not correct. *Ānāpāna* just means ‘breathing.’ And of course if you’re just breathing – I mean you’ve been doing that since the day you were born and you’ll continue doing it till the day you die. The proper name for it is *ānāpānasati*. There’s the breathing and mindfulness with the breathing. If it’s just breathing, it’s no big deal. You’re not going to learn anything new. There needs to be mindfulness *with* the breathing. So it’s important... *āna* means breathing in, *apāna* means to breathe out. So it’s mindfulness with breathing in and out. Please don’t forget the mindfulness. As soon as you leave off the mindfulness, you’re totally lost.

Now also have to be careful how we interpret this mindfulness with breathing in and out. Some people have a very narrow interpretation that it’s just mindfulness of breathing, that you’re just obsessed with the breathing. But if you examine it the way the Buddha taught it, it should be translated ‘mindfulness with breathing.’ Because one is mindful of some reality of nature while breathing in and breathing out. If you examine the Buddha’s teaching on this, at first you’re mindful of things directly associated with the breathing. But as it’s been taught to you here, you should understand by now that there’s also mindfulness of the feelings, mindfulness of the mind, and most of all mindfulness of *dhammas*. So it’s not just mindfulness of the breathing. But with the breathing one is mindful of these different things. And if the object of our mindfulness in investigation changes... and there are altogether 16 objects of mindfulness, 16 truths of nature, that we are mindful of.

Now the last group of these, those concerned with *dhamma*. These are purely *vipassanā*. Mindfulness with breathing as the Buddha taught it, the fourth area which is *dhamma* is what is totally *vipassanā*, pure *vipassanā*. The other areas with the body, the feelings, and the mind, that’s not pure *vipassanā*. But in fact there will be lots of little insights. Just insight into the way the breathing works; an insight into how to calm the breathing. Those are genuine insights. But they’re little ones. They don’t really stand out. You may not notice them.



So if it's just mindfulness of the breathing or mindfulness of the feelings – or even just mindfulness of the mind, of states of mind – there will be little insights. But it's only in the final section where there's direct mindfulness of impermanence, fading away, the quenching of attachment, and tossing back. This is the pure vipassanā.

You should know that, if you are aware of and understanding that if we breathe in a long, deep natural way, that the breathing becomes calm and peaceful. And then the body is calmed and the tension in the body goes away. If you see this for yourself... Not thinking about it, but you will see this for yourself. That is considered a kind of vipassanā. This is a weak, it's still weak, not complete, but this is considered to be some insight. And then this is deepened and developed further until it becomes full vipassanā in the last stage of practice.

When one is mindful of the feelings of satisfaction, of rapture, and then you see how these concoct thinking. You see how this excited happy feeling stirs up thoughts. That's insight. That's a little bit of insight although it's not yet full.

If you studied the Pāli language, then you would be able to translate the term *ānāpānasati* correctly. If one knows Pāli and understands the meaning of this word, you'll recognize that what it means is one is mindful of – one scrutinizes – a particular or any truth or fact of nature with every inhalation and every exhalation. This is what the Pāli word means – one scrutinizes any particular truth or fact of nature with every inhalation and every exhalation.

But there's a little difficulty in that in the Pāli language the word *dhamma* refers to everything. So if you say it means being mindful of everything or anything. So we need to get a little more specific.

If we review *ānāpānasati* from step to step, from the very beginning, you'll see that the first lessons are dealing with characteristics, qualities, features of the breathing. It's scrutinizing different qualities and characteristics of the breathing – the longness of the breathing, the shortness of the breathing, the fineness, the calmness of the breathing. This is what is scrutinized step by step in the first lessons.

You know now that there are 16 lessons or topics for our study and investigation while breathing in and breathing out. Actually we could specify far more if we wanted to because we could be much more detailed about them. But to speak of 16 is sufficient without getting too complicated and overly

detailed. So there are these 16 different objects for our scrutiny. It's not just being mindful of the breathing. There's far more to do than that.

This word can even be used for things that have nothing to do with Dhamma. For example instead of practicing the 16 lessons, you can just spend your time thinking of home. And that would be, if you do that with every inhalation and every exhalation, a kind of *ānāpānasati* also although it has nothing to do with Dhamma.

Even in a harmful and nasty way, one can... if for example you hate somebody and you just sit there thinking about what they've done and why you hate them and on and on, while with every inhalation and every exhalation you're just thinking about how much you hate this person. Although this is quite harmful for you, you can call it a kind of stupid *ānāpānasati*.

If we speak about the Buddha's *ānāpānasati*, then we're talking about the 16 lessons of *ānāpānasati* which the Buddha taught. Outside of Buddhism, however, there are other forms of *ānāpānasati*. Some of them are just kind of useless and there are even forms which are dangerous.

*What happens to the mind and body when one dies? (SK: which means, I guess, when the physical body dies.) What is left after death?*

*Does consciousness continue in some form or another?*

(This question is on a different subject. It's not related to *ānāpānasati*.)

In Buddhism there is no self. There is no *attā* to carry on after death. In Buddhism's observation of life there is no self, *attā*, to be found which would... some self or soul that would carry on after death. Now if one practices *ānāpānasati* correctly, one is practicing for Nibbāna a synonym of which is *nirodha*. *Nirodha* means 'to be thoroughly quenched.' It's the quenching where there is no remainder, with nothing left over. So if one practices *ānāpānasati* for this remainder-less quenching, for this thorough cessation – so you have to be careful what is quenched and not get too many wrong ideas about this, but if one practices *ānāpānasati* like this, steadily, up until the point of death, then there is this quenching with nothing remaining.

With these ideas about dying and then being reborn or reincarnated somewhere, one has to be very careful about these things. Because our goal is to

end *dukkha*, to quench *dukkha* – and *dukkha* is here. And so you’ve got to quench it – you’ve got to end the *dukkha* – here. Imagine that if you died and then there was some rebirth somewhere. Well then there’s just more *dukkha*. So be very careful about these ideas because the problem is *dukkha* here and now. The problem is not *dukkha* in the future.

No matter how many times you might get reborn, if there’s such a thing, *dukkha* is always the same.

If you’re going to end *dukkha* in Thailand or you’re going to end *dukkha* in America or Europe, the way is the same. Everywhere there’s the same way of ending *dukkha*.

Because *dukkha* is the same everywhere.

As for the question of ‘is there anything left after death?’ First we must point out, that’s not the problem. Whether something remains or not is not the problem. The problem once again is *dukkha*. It’s a very simple matter. The things which have been borrowed from nature, such as the six elements, these then are returned to nature.

*Do you believe in God or in some form of higher power?*

When speaking of God, or belief in God, this is something important and we can say ‘Yes, I believe in God.’ In fact this is necessary. But people need to be very careful about the word because if you cling to the word ‘God,’ people are giving it all kinds of different meanings. And in fact if a Buddhist says ‘I believe in God,’ there are certain Christians who will go and print it in books and use it for propaganda purposes. So it’s not the word that matters, but the meaning.

And so the meaning of God, we see is God is the highest thing that we must obey – the highest thing that must be obeyed. If we examine we’ll see that all living things have some highest thing that must be obeyed. No living creature can avoid this. If you want to call it God, you can. But don’t get stuck in the sound of the word – no matter what the language – as some very propagandistic people do, but see the meaning of the word. And there is something that all living things... even a dog, even a dog has its highest thing that it must obey. Now for Christians and the so-called theistic religions – actually everything is

theistic, if you understand the word properly – but Christianity has a personal god. God is conceived in personal anthropomorphic terms. And so that's one kind of god. And for Christians this is the highest thing that must be obeyed. It's their understanding of the thing... the highest power that has to be obeyed.

Buddhists however don't see this thing as being personal or having a personality that gets angry and all that. For Buddhists the highest thing which must be obeyed is a law and not a person. It's the law of nature or the truth of nature which we call *idappaccayatā* (the law of conditionality), the fact that all things happen through conditions, through causes and conditions. For Buddhists this is the thing which must be obeyed. And this is absolute. There's no escaping this law of nature. So let's not cling to words but understand the meaning of them and you'll see that all living things – even plants, snails, worms, dogs – all of them have some highest thing that must be obeyed. If it's not obeyed, there is pain, there is suffering. And so if we speak in this way, everyone must believe in some god. Of course, the question is how one understands god – one's understanding of this highest thing that must be obeyed. But for Buddhists, we prefer to call it the law of nature.

So let us stress that the meaning of God is the highest thing which must be obeyed. But there are many levels to this, to God. There are many levels depending on the intelligence of each person or of each being. For example, for dogs – they have some highest power which must be obeyed which is us, their owner. For a dog, God is their owner. Or for example, children in school, God is the teacher because the teacher has a ruler and if the kids get out of line they get punished. So in that time and place, the god of the school child is the teacher. And then there are other levels.

There are people who have money and the most powerful thing for them is money. Money is what they have to obey. This is according to their understanding. And then ideas of God develop until we come to the conceptions in religions such as Hinduism or Christianity where God is personalized. God is seen as being a person. And one must obey that personal god. And then finally there is the god of Buddhism which is seen to be not at all personal but totally natural – not supernatural but natural and is the law of nature.

All of these levels of God must be obeyed according to the intelligence and understanding of each person. In fact, each person has their own god although this may change from time to time. But all have some god. And what's very interesting – an interesting coincidence – is that if you pronounce the word

more long, you pronounce *gohd*. But if you shorten it, it's 'god.' And in Thai the word *got* means 'law.' Thais pronounce it *goht*. There's 'god' and there's *got* which means law – the highest thing which needs to be obeyed.

Some people have a husband or wife whom they love very much. Do any of you have this kind of god?

*If you achieve Nibbāna, are you breaking the laws of nature? Is it not natural to be greedy, selfish, these other dukkhas?*

*(SK: Do you break the law of nature by realizing Nibbāna? Isn't it natural to be selfish? Is that what you're saying?)*

The word 'Dhamma' means 'nature' and there are four meanings to this word 'nature.' There are four aspects of nature.

The first meaning or aspect of nature is all things, everything, existing in this world – all the mental and physical things of this world.

The second meaning of nature is the law of conditionality which governs all these material and mental things.

The third meaning of nature is the duty that needs to be followed according to that law of nature. If there is a law that's governing all these mental and physical things, then all those mental and physical things must harmonize with – must follow – that law. And this is called 'duty.'

And then the fourth kind of nature is the fruits, the results that come from doing that duty.

Now of these four meanings of nature, the most important is the third one because that's what we practice. The most important meaning of nature is the duty according to natural law. But this is just more nature. This is totally natural, that there is a duty to be done. And when the duty is done, the result is coolness, is Nibbāna. And when the duty is done perfectly, there is the perfect result of perfect coolness or Nibbāna. And this is just more nature. So if you study the meaning of the word 'Dhamma' or nature, you'll see that all things are nature – that realizing Nibbāna is just part of nature. It doesn't go against nature in any way.

You shouldn't be surprised or think it's strange that we say Nibbāna is a nature. You need to understand that nature comes in two basic forms or there are two kinds of nature. One is what in the West is called phenomena. There are phenomena. This is in Pāli called *saṅkhata* – things which are created, which have beginnings and ends, things which are constantly changing. All these phenomena or saṅkhata are one kind of nature. But there is another kind of nature which unfortunately in the West there isn't any clear term. We think however the term 'noumenon' might be the closest. This is a translation of the Pāli word *asaṅkhata* which means things which don't change, which aren't created, which don't end – things which aren't born, aren't created, aren't made. These are *asaṅkhata*, unconcocted. There are the concocted things, phenomena, and the unconcocted, the noumenon, which is... there's only one of these and it is also nature. So if you understand that there are these two kinds of nature, then you won't be surprised to hear that Nibbāna is totally natural.

In Buddhism there is nothing supernatural. We don't have the word 'supernatural.' Everything is nature – even the law of nature. The law of nature may govern other natures, but that law of nature is still natural. It's still part of nature. There isn't anything which is outside of, above or beyond nature. So we don't use the word 'supernatural.'

The word 'super-nature' or 'supernatural' is for children. But if you understand nature thoroughly and correctly, you won't need this childish idea of supernatural.

(SK: I reminded about the part about selfishness and whether selfishness is unnatural or unselfishness is unnatural and he said:)

Both selfishness and unselfishness are natural. Selfishness is natural and it brings on the further natural things of pain, suffering, crime, and all kinds of severe ecological problems. Whereas unselfishness is equally natural but it brings on different natural results such as peace and freedom from dukkha.

Whether being wrong or being right, whether black or white, all of these are natures. All of them are natural.

All of the different pairs of opposites – male/female, up & down – all of these are just natures, are natural.

*If God is the law of nature and there is nothing beyond that, then how did the law of nature come to exist in the first place?*

In Buddhism we speak of the law of nature as being *asaṅkhata* which we just mentioned. It means something that doesn't depend on anything else. So you're implying that the law of nature must be *saṅkhata* – something that depends on other things, something which is conditioned by other things. But for us the law of nature is *asaṅkhata*. It's unconditioned. It's totally independent. It doesn't depend on any other conditions. It exists in itself without depending on any other things. We speak of the law of nature, we speak of Nibbāna, we speak of voidness as being *asaṅkhata*. It need not depend on anything, including our thoughts. None of these things depend on us or our thinking or our beliefs or any of that.

This is a very difficult thing to understand in Buddhism, this *asaṅkhata* which has no causes, which has no conditions. This reality that doesn't depend on anything else but it exists by itself. Although it's very interesting that, if we speak very carefully, we say that the *asaṅkhata* is neither existence nor non-existence. But that's even harder to understand. There's a word that expresses this. It's *atammayatā*.

(SK: And he asked me to explain this).

*Atammayatā* means not conditioned by that thing or not dependent on that condition. *Saṅkhata* – ordinary concocted things which have beginnings and ends which are always changing – these are always dependent on other things. And this is how our minds usually are. Our minds are always depending on thoughts, on feelings, and so on. But there is a reality which we are trying to point to. Sometimes we call it 'Nibbāna,' sometimes we call it the law of nature, depending on how we're looking at it. And this is *asaṅkhata*. It depends on nothing as we've been explaining. And another name for that is *atammayatā* – the state or the reality, the truth, which isn't conditioned by that; *a* means 'not,' *tam* means 'that,' *māyā* means 'made by' or 'formed out of,' *ta* means 'the truth' or the reality, the nature. So 'that nature which isn't dependent on anything, isn't conditioned by anything.' Another word for that is *atammayatā*. *Asaṅkhata* means 'unconcocted.' And there are other words which mean unborn, undying, unchanging, and so on.

When the mind can realize this reality of *asaṅkhata*, of *atammayatā*. When the mind realizes *atammayatā*, we can say that the mind has *atammayatā*. And when the mind has *atammayatā*, the mind is totally free. Then the mind isn't

dependent on any thoughts, on any feeling, on any worldly condition. The mind is totally independent. This means it's not grasping at anything. It's not attaching to anything. And this we can call the unconcocted mind. The mind that is totally independent because it has realized atammayātā.

Sometimes we call this the *paramattha-dhamma*. *Paramattha* means 'supreme' – that which there is nothing higher or beyond. The *paramattha-dhamma* can be translated 'the supreme thing.' This is another name for Nibbāna – the supreme thing. There's nothing beyond it, nothing higher than it.

So in English you have the words 'more supreme' and 'most supreme' which is getting carried away. There's only 'the supreme,' the supreme thing.

Some people have an idea of God that God you pray to and ask for things from God. But you should understand that a god that depends on human prayers, or a god that depends on human worship, or a god that can be bribed by sacrifices or by offerings or by singing songs or ceremonies or rituals, that isn't God. It might be somebody else's god, but it's not the god of Buddhism. If you use the word god in terms of Buddhism, it's this thing which is totally independent of all other things, of all other natures. And so it can't be bribed. It's not affected by our worship, by our prayers or anything like that. It's independent of anything human beings can do.

To say that it's not dependent on other things, anything – it doesn't rely on anything; it's not associated with anything. These words are hard to explain.

This is the true meaning of the word 'supreme' – independent, needn't rely on anything, unlimited by anything.

*Have you experienced the paramattha-dhamma?*

We don't answer personal questions. We're not here to talk about individuals and so we have no answer to such personal questions.



*As the space-element is the element against which the others exist as a background/foreground, is Nibbāna the background against which conditioned phenomena exist?*

The meanings are different. The *ākāsa-dhātu* (the space-element) is void so that other things can take place or happen. This is a very ordinary meaning of voidness. Whereas Nibbāna is totally void. Its voidness doesn't relate to other things the way the voidness of the space-element relates to the other elements.

For the meaning of Nibbāna, it is to be void of defilements. When we use the word 'void,' it means to be void, empty, but also free from. So to be void of defilements, to be void of *dukkha*, to be free from 'me' and 'mine,' to be void of and free from all problems, from all burdens, this is the meaning for Nibbāna.

Existing such that there's no need for existence. Being where there's no need to be.

Voidness is existing without any existing.

Do you understand?

All *sāṅkhata* things exist in order to exist and then they don't last very long. But Nibbāna doesn't need to exist. Its existence is totally different. And so it's the absolute thing and it doesn't fall apart.

*Walking without the walker* is to be void – void of defilements, void of 'me' and 'mine,' void of *dukkha*, void of burdens.

*During meditation one is very much concentrated only on oneself. This can be quite selfish, if it is done only for the benefit of oneself and not for the benefits of others too. Looking around, there are many beings suffering who need our help urgently. How can we help others through meditation?*

Selfishness is due to the power of ignorance. If it isn't ignorant, then you can't call it selfishness. So when it's not ignorant but instead is through the power of mindfulness and wisdom, then we don't call it selfishness. If one is helping oneself with ignorance, that is selfish. But if one is truly helping oneself with wisdom, you can't call that selfish. And so when we free ourselves from ignorance, then we can also help to free others from ignorance. So that they're no longer selfish. If it's wise, one frees oneself from selfishness, and then one can help others to free themselves from selfishness.

Of course, at the beginning, when we get started, there's some selfishness. There may be a lot of selfishness. But if we practice correctly, there's less and less selfishness. The more correct our Dhamma practice the less selfishness there is, until there's no more selfishness. So at the start there's a lot of selfishness. And then as we practice more and more correctly, there's less and less selfishness. So Dhamma practice is this transformation from selfishness to unselfishness. Don't expect to be totally unselfish at the beginning. But try to get free from it as quickly as possible.

If you came here as a tourist, you came here selfishly. But if you leave as a pilgrim, you will have left self behind and as a pilgrim you will travel unselfishly.

*I would like to ask more about Nibbāna. Can you say that Nibbāna is a kind of dhātu?*

The other day we said that there isn't anything which isn't a *dhātu* (element). So of course Nibbāna is a *dhātu*, an element also. Nibbāna is called the *asaṅkhata-dhātu* – you can call it the *nibbāna-dhātu*; you can call it the voidness-dhātu or the quenching (*nirodha*)-*dhātu* – which is the dhātu which doesn't depend on other dhātus. Whereas all other dhātus are *saṅkhata* – they depend on, they're changed by, they're influenced by, other dhātus. In the meaning of element or dhātu in Buddhism, Nibbāna is an element because everything is an element.

Now this is the Buddhist understanding of the word 'element,' *dhātu*. You won't find the Nibbāna on the Periodic Table of Elements, for example. But even in the Buddhist understanding of the word dhātu, there is the element of being and there is the element of not-being. And there is the element of neither being nor not-being. Being is an element, not-being is an element, and neither being nor not-being is an element in Buddhism.

This Buddhist meaning of the word *dhātu*, you won't find it in any of the dictionaries in the world. This is the problem. All of the dictionaries leave out the Buddhist meanings of words. So people have trouble understanding them. We have to improve our dictionaries a little bit.

It's a little strange, isn't it? The existence element, the non-existence element, and the not existing and not not-existing element.

This doesn't appear in the dictionaries you used at university.

*Is all of life suffering? Or is suffering something that just happens occasionally? Right now I don't feel terribly distressed about anything and usually I don't. If I was to analyze my 'self' in its smaller parts, there are many components and bacteria which could be undergoing distress right now. So the idea of life being suffering is somewhat paradoxical sometimes because there are times when things don't appear to be in pain.*

*(SB: You used the words 'not terribly distressed' which sounds like there's some stress, there's just not a lot. Are you saying no stress or some?)*

*Enough for me to recognize it as being, as myself, as being in pain.*

*(SK: You don't feel any right now?)*

*On a large aggregate level, the way I'm experiencing myself right now, I don't feel suffering. I could find some, I suppose, if I looked hard enough and I was meditating. But without a lot of thought and analysis, I just feel okay right now.*

Whether life is *dukkha* or not depends on how we hold it, how we use it, how we deal with it. There is a way of managing life so there is no *dukkha*. And there's a way of managing life so that it is *dukkha*. So we come to study Buddha-Dhamma so that we can live life in a way that there's no *dukkha*. If we hold on to it in a certain way, there for sure will be pain, stress, *dukkha*. But if we don't, if we hold on to it in another way, there's nothing painful or stressful about it.

Any life which is still under the influence of positive & negative will suffer, will experience pain. But any life which is free of the influence of positive & negative will have no *dukkha*.

So we suggest that you consider this study and practice of Dhamma to be a lifting life above positive & negative. Take life and lift it above the influence of positive & negative.

Any life which still must laugh and must cry, is a life where there is suffering. Any life that still must be sad & glad, is a life where there is still suffering. To be free, life must be above having to laugh and having to cry – be above gladness and sadness.

Some people will say that that doesn't sound like much fun. It's not as exciting as living in the world. Some people think that Nibbāna is bland, it's tasteless; that for them it isn't any fun – that it can't beat the ups and downs of worldly existence. Of course everybody can think what they wish. But one should be very careful.

Nibbāna has no booze. Nibbāna has no dancing. And so most people aren't interested in Nibbāna. If there's no beer in Nibbāna, most people don't want to go.

*If, as I think you said, that when you die, the consciousness and the elements return to nature. If that's regardless of whether you've attained Nibbāna or not, then for what reason would a person strive very hard to attain Nibbāna? If he can strive for material wealth or kill people to get what he wants (or she), and then the same thing happens when they die? Do you understand what I mean?*

Because we don't want any problems – we don't want these hassles right now, right here – we eliminate attachment. We eliminate the 'me' and 'mine' right now in order to be free right now. It's not something that we're waiting for at death. It's not something that one gets at death. The question is right now, living free of dukkha.

(This kind of thinking has happened before. Many of you have heard about Jim Jones and the Temple of God or whatever his sect was called. They believed that they were living correctly – that their spiritual practice was perfect – and that if they died, they would go straight to God. So they figured out 'why wait?' Why waste time sitting around on this earth when if we die we go straight to God? So then they all drank cyanide Kool-Aid and killed themselves. So this kind of thinking has happened before. This idea, if we die the problem's over. So why not get it over with?)

Even the children were encouraged to drink the Kool-Ai – what was it, three hundred something people died?)

*Is it absolutely necessary to experience dukkha in order to realize Nibbāna?  
And if yes, why and to what extent?*

All of us ought to know [*dukkha*]. In fact, all of us do know it. And we ought to be thankful for [*dukkha*] because it's what makes us wise. So everyone should be thankful for *dukkha* because it's what chases us to Nibbāna. Basically you only have to experience *dukkha* for as long as you're stupid enough to make it. Once one is smart enough to stop creating *dukkha*, one no longer needs to learn from it. But as long as we haven't learned the lesson, then we have to keep spinning around in the *dukkha* of our own creation.

Of course if there's no interest in ending *dukkha*, then there's no Nibbāna.

If there's no *dukkha*, then we don't need God to save us from *dukkha*.

Finally, thank you. So, thanks.

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Transcribed by Arthur Brown in Feb.-March 2015

Audio files: 5125340110040.mp3 & 9101 (4) Dhamma questions and responses.mp3

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